

## Our Summer Vacation

We spent the night in Fort Stockton. We ate in a diner where we were the only customers. We soon found out why. I ordered steak, though I don't normally eat beef, the whole animal thing, and when I looked down at my plate I wasn't sure what I had in front of me. A steak, if I remembered correctly, came three-quarters to an inch high, and it bled when you cut through it. This thing lay flat, barely as wide as my little finger, and I thought maybe they had confused my order and brought veal or a flattened chicken breast.

"No," Marcus said, cutting the corner and taking a bite, "it's beef. You should know better than to order a steak in a diner."

Marcus didn't fare much better. He'd done what he thought was right and gotten a hamburger and fries. The stale bread attempted to cover up the wilted lettuce and mushy tomato. His fries were unspeakable.

It was, I think, the salad that did me in. The iceberg lettuce carried a light brown tint around the edges and the black olives seemed born from a different planet. Or maybe the chunky macaroni and cheese. No matter. In our room I grabbed the toilet bowl and heaved my guts out for a third time.

I napped while Marcus watched HBO. Me and nighttime naps don't do well. If I doze with it dark out I have a hard time going to sleep later on. And I'm not exactly the best person to have awake in your bed for extended hours. I have a tendency to want to talk, which meant there has to be two people awake in the bed.

We stayed in a Great Western, though there was nothing great or western about it. Our non-smoking room had cigarette burns on the floor, on the mildewed chair, on the blanket, oh, that blanket, what horrible tales it must have had living in its stains and burns. At least the TV had seventy-two channels, though we pretty much kept it on HBO the whole time. There was a Game of Thrones marathon, the third season, when things were just starting to get good, those dragons. I did my running commentary.

The only thing we could do was have sex. But I didn't want to have sex. Marcus didn't want to have sex either. He said my breath still smelled like vomit. I brushed my teeth twice more and used Listerine again. I'd done all that before, after I'd finished throwing up. Vomit, no matter what you do, has a tendency to linger. But the fact that Marcus didn't want to have sex made me want to have sex and by the time I got him to where he wanted to have sex I didn't want to have sex any longer. And that made him sort of mad and when he got mad he got hornier and, while it took his best wiles, he got me bothered enough to want to have sex but just as we were about to have sex it became plain and obvious

that the most important part of the male equation no longer wanted to have sex and by all appearances never would. Repeat. Rinse.

We ate at a local IHOP. I don't like pancakes, or usually breakfast. I am a half-bagel woman, toasted with a little bit of butter. I ordered eggs, bacon and hash browns. I don't like eggs either, or bacon, but crusty hash browns, those are a gift from god. I tried to get a plate of just hash browns. I'd eat a pile of them. They should offer endless hash browns. Our waitress gave me a good laugh.

I must say that it was the happiest IHOP I have ever been in, though I haven't ate at many, maybe two. Everyone seemed tip-top, overjoyed in the bright morning light. It made me even more miserable. I picked at my eggs. I lifted up a piece of bacon and stared at it from both sides. The hash browns were gone in a matter of seconds. Then I wished I hadn't eaten them so quick. I should have savored them more. Marcus ate pancakes, because we were in a house of pancakes. He slathered his mound with syrup and then halfway through slathered it more. He ignored my comments.

When we had first planned this trip we both agreed as little phone as possible, which meant I spent an inordinate amount of time worrying what was going on with my phone, what precious messages I was missing, what important calls rang to my wretched voicemail—Hi, you have reached Sarah's phone, blah, blah, my voice too high and hesitant—who from work needed me most, though when I did turn the damned thing on I only found texts about future doctor and dentist appointments and voicemails full of robocalls, and the news out in the

world was summer news, meaning no news, so, while Marcus plowed his way through his pancakes, I spent an inordinate amount of time on my phone sketching our drive down to Terlingua, a straight road, highway 148, two and a half hours. Not much mystery there.

I found a stray road, off to the side, a little bit off the beaten path, and we talked about it, picturing the Hills Have Eyes and whatnot, so we decided we had to give it a whirl. How dangerous was the world really, outside of movies and fairy tales?

No, this isn't foreshadowing. There are foreshadows, but that isn't one. All of life might be just one big foreshadow. Some believe, not me, that the afterlife is a postshadow, a coming into the light. As long as it isn't a strobe or a disco ball I'm okay with it, though I consider the heavenly concept threadbare and piecemeal.

I am getting to the point of this story, bear with me. On my phone, it suggested we bring along water. We'd seen this before, as we planned our trip. Everything said the weather was hot and the sun brutal and the distances vast and empty and you should carry water in case you break down and have to wait for help in the hot sun. We bought five gallon jugs of water at a convenience store, plus a cooler and ice and a twelve pack of Lone Star. We were definitely going to stay hydrated. The beer was a mistake, nasty stuff that tasted like heightened piss, but I'll get back to that later.

One thing and another back in the hotel room and it took us forever to get on the road. We hadn't had sex the night before and we thought we should have sex now, even though neither one of us wanted to have sex, so we comprised and did the whole oral thing. Marcus was better at it than I was, which you always have to like in a man. He knew exactly how to get the motor humming. And we had so much fun doing what we were doing we stopped doing the double duty oral stuff and ended up doing a whole bunch of fun style sex. Then there was a decent HBO movie on the TV. All of which meant we didn't leave the hotel until after two in the afternoon. The clerk at the desk made noises about an eleven AM check out time, but he didn't stand a chance against the both of us.

I know, by now, that it sounds like we sometimes spent an inordinate amount of time having not sex, we had, in fact, engaged in a lot of sex while we were in Albuquerque, so much so that was why we never made it to Santa Fe. We even had an entire day in our hotel bed, calling room service for our food and wine, dancing naked to music on the radio.

His thing fit my thing, and my thing fit his thing, and you can't ask for better than that.

I needed to drive, because Marcus had eaten too many pancakes. He sat in the passenger seat and suffered. I bought a pair of sunglasses at the same place we'd gotten all our liquids. They were dark, very dark, through them the world had a doomsday look to it. They did, in the rearview mirror, make me

seem dashing and debonair, so I kept them on, even though I couldn't see much of a damn thing.

We were on a trip to visit Tom, an old friend of Marcus who had dropped out from the tech world and settled in a small cinderblock house in Terlingua. I liked Tom a lot. He was one of the good ones. Then after spending two days there and a day hiking a bit of Big Bend we would head over to Marfa, where Margaret had gone to live to become an artist, become more of an artist, since she was already an artist, and from her long emails I knew she was failing, failing at being an artist, though that's what artists were supposed to do, all artists failed, it was what they did. If you didn't fail, you weren't an artist. I'd been failing at being a writer for years by then.

So we're on the road and the distances seem whack, my sunglasses not helping. I'm driving and I get off onto the stray road and there's a scent of adventure in the air and up ahead there's a plateau mountain and that plateau mountain kind of thing looking like it's out of a western movie just keeps standing there the same down in the approaching plain. It's like we're driving and driving and we're standing still. Marcus is in a syrupy doze. Our research said, out of the whole United States, that this was the one area where cell phone service was still unavailable. There was nothing on the radio either. I got to listen to the rattling hum of our economy rental car. I reached behind me and got a beer from the ice chest. As I said before, a wretched taste, and I nearly spit out my first sip. I wanted to be home. I wanted to be walking down the hill from our

apartment on Green Street. I wanted to feel the morning fog. I wanted to see a bare glimpse, only there if you knew how you had to stand on our couch and turn your head sideways, of one of the Golden Gate pillars. Though for the last month the only thing I'd been wanting was to be driving this road to Terlingua. I thought this road might lead to some life-altering epiphany, as if there are such things as epiphanies, which there aren't. Here I was, instead, with rancid beer in my gullet, and another one between my legs, thinking about how great home was, when for months I'd been hating on San Francisco, with its clammy air and ever increasing white population and always present weed odor, not that I didn't like pot, especially the edibles, and really right now, on this endless road, what I wouldn't give for a little candy, and we had discussed it, flying to Albuquerque with some pieces stowed away, though paranoia got the best of us. We spent a lot of time trying to decide between flying into El Paso or Albuquerque. We finally chose New Mexico, because we could drive to Santa Fe and see what that was about, which we never did, having too much fun in Albuquerque. We rented a room in an old downtown hotel and had more fun than you can possibly imagine. Three nights, an absolute blast. We should have stayed there the whole time. We stayed there instead of going to Santa Fe. Maybe we should have gone to Santa Fe and then returned for more of Albuquerque. On the fourth morning, badly hungover, the sky heavy on our shoulders, we drove to Fort Stockton.

We only had good memories of New Mexico, except for that couple we met one night in a downtown bar. They seemed great, fascinating people, both

very happy with their lives, a rare occurrence, but when Marcus left for the bathroom the woman whispered low, asking if we might be interested in a foursome, how much fun it would be, and I said no, no, thank you, and I told them not to bring up their request around Marcus, because he was funny about such things, and they promised they wouldn't, though I found out later that while I was doing my bathroom bit they did ask him and he said no too. I guess they thought he might say yes and by him saying yes they could wrangle me into saying yes and we could all have our jollies, but it wasn't going to happen, it was impossible.

In our hotel room I asked him how he answered them and he said he'd told them it probably wasn't a good idea. Probably not a good idea? There was nothing good or probable about the idea. He said he didn't want to hurt their feelings. I returned to: Probably not a good idea? And this discussion went on for about an hour. Then we had sex.

This stray road was strayer than it looked on the map. It became a combination of dirt and gravel, leaving the asphalt far behind. If our phone had gotten service we could've tempered our growing anxiety that we might have taken a wrong fork somewhere behind us, though neither of us remembered any kind of fork or turn. We decided if we didn't feel any better about what was going on by the time we hit the western movie geological thing we would turn around and head back to the main highway. We knew the highway would get us where we wanted to go.



Marcus and I have a history, most of it lovely stuff. He's a handsome man, one with the ladies, and I'm pretty good, one with the boys, and it took us a long while for us to be one with each other and leave all the girls and boys behind. There was a lot of touch and go and a lot of hurt feelings on both sides. But when it was good it was very good and it got to be where we wanted it to be very good all the time and we were fortunate enough that we both understood the wear and tear we had brought on a chance to be happy. I can't believe I can actually write the word happy. I must be losing my mind. I am losing my mind.

We'd finally made it to where we were finally hitting the half cut off mountain and we were deciding to turn around, when the rental made a funny sound. Not a ha-ha sound. An oh fucking shit sound. Marcus perked up. What was that? I said I didn't know. He said it didn't sound good. I said I knew it didn't sound good. The car thunked to a stop. I'd just finished my third beer.

We waited in the heat. We could have been the last couple on earth. Nothing moved. I sweated so much I could have won a wet t-shirt contest. We tried, to get out of the sun, to sit in the car, but god was it beastly hot in there, even with the doors opened. We drank beer.

Then we waited, oh, we waited. I'm talking hours.

Most of the time, in any of my previous relationships, this sort of debacle would have led to dire consequences. Few pairings could withstand such heat and solitude without devolving into anger and recrimination, those harsh stabs and swipes only couples know how to zing, but Marcus and I did a pretty good

job of keeping those natural altercations at bay. We played a comedy version of Tell Me a Story I Haven't Heard Before, making sure we kept it light. We finished the beer. The sun looked like it was thinking about wanting to set and we were halfway through our first jug of water when we saw a red truck approaching. I say approaching, with the weird distance thing out there in the middle of nowhere it still took them thirty minutes to make it to us. Two young women, which made me relax, I'd had this whole Deliverance and A Good Man is Hard to Find thing going on in the back and then the front of my mind, men with shotguns out in this emptiness, so I didn't pay much attention the first five minutes to what they said while we all stood around and stared down at our car's engine.

They were urchins, as in crawled out of the mud and didn't wash off kind of urchins. I'd never seen such dirt out in public. And it wasn't like they had just crawled out from whatever rock, no, you could tell this was how they lived, in their caked jeans and tattered shirts and sweat-stained cowboy hats. Layers of dirt formed on their necks. Their hair hang down in damp strands. Their faces needed a good scrubbing. Other than that, they were actually attractive. They had those thin bodies cowgirls have. And those eyes, oh, those eyes. They might've been high, they were stoned, that was obvious, a light-hearted everyday sort of stoned, but that didn't disguise their sky-blue eyes. If you cleaned them up, they'd be pep-squad material.

The blond said, "It's not a belt. The belts are where they should be. You might have thrown something inside there. These Jap cars, you never know what's going on. Give me an old Ford or Chevy. Take my truck, I know every inch of the motor. I could find my way inside and out."

We stared more at the engine. Nothing happened when I turned the key. Not even a click-click sound.

They seemed too young to be like they were. Both thin and small boned, their cowboy hats worn and tattered, they stood hard and erect, as if they were facing a strong wind. There was no wind, no breeze, and it was hotter than hell. My hand burned whenever I touched anything on the car. They spoke to each other in a low coded communication.

They asked what we were doing on the road. They said people didn't drive on the road. People normally took the highway if they were heading for Terlingua. They asked if we were searching for Running Eagle.

"No. Not any Running Eagle."

"Are you sure?"

"People come looking for Running Eagle, when they hear about her."

"No Running Eagle."

"She has the gift."

"She won't just see anybody. You've got to be the right kind."

They decided, without us agreeing, or disagreeing, all of us knowing we were at their mercy, to drive us to their campsite. The sun was going down and

you didn't drive this road after dark, especially if you were female, as they said, because you basically were writing your death warrant if you broke down and a guy came by. We weren't in a position to argue. Besides, it seemed like all this had the making for a really good story when we got home.

We'd have to ride in the back, on the bed floor, because there wasn't room upfront. The metal ridges were blazing from the vicious sun and it felt like I had a pair of irons burning up my ass. My hand sizzled when I put my hand down as we took off on the road. Marcus asked if I was all right and I said I wasn't sure about all this, this spending the night, and he told me to look at it like an unexpected adventure. He asked me when was the last time I spent the night under the stars and yes I remembered but I sure as hell wasn't going to relive it for him. I had it safely laid away in my Stories to Tell Him When We're Further Down the Road. Getting lost in the woods had only been the beginning and wanting to stay lost in the woods was near the end. It was a long story. Marcus shifted and put me on his lap. He said one ass burning was better than two. I called him Man Who Burns Own Ass.

There were rocks and there was sand and there was a fairly large-sized tent and a camp stove and a giant cooler and logs and a place where they made fires and off to the side, on the ground, a pair of tin sheet metals, like the kind you see people use for walls in shanty towns. Why here? In the middle of nothing? Then I asked myself: Why not here? Nothing here was just as nothing as nothing over there.

They'd said their names earlier, but I hadn't paid attention, and I expected them to be something like Blue Juniper and Owl Two-Knobbed. Instead they were Maria and Eleanor. Oh well. Blond Maria and brunette Eleanor. They saw us look around at the Spartan campground and they said, "You don't have much, when you don't need much."

Blond Maria said, "You know how you have to smile when you meet someone and you're getting ready just before you meet and you know you have to smile a certain way, as if you are glad to meet them, we don't have to do that anymore. We're beyond that."

I said, "So, you don't smile when you meet someone?"

"We might, but we don't have to. There's a difference."

Eleanor added, "It is a sin."

"What is?"

"Doing what others want you to do."

"I thought it was called good manners."

Maria said, "Good manners. It is: I will do to you so you will do for me.

That is also called manipulation. And manipulation is a sin."

I saw where this headed. Marcus got a kick out of it. While they heated the ramen noodles, while we ate the noodles as the sun finished dropping below the red and orange horizon, he and the girls traded existential homilies, with him scattering Buddhism bites to season their Apache wisdoms. Oh, boy.

They nodded when I asked if they'd gotten all these ideas from Running Eagle. I said she sounded like an interesting woman. They said she was a Spirit. I said she must be an interesting spirit. I asked if the great Running Eagle would be joining us. They said she already was.

"She's with us now."

"Oh, is she?" I looked around, trying to keep my snide edge down, but I couldn't. Giant imaginary eagles running loose in the high desert did nothing for me. Belief brings out my sarcastic side.

Oh, they didn't recognize Him because He no longer looked like He had before? Why would He not want to look like He had before? Was it a heavenly parlor trick? Was it like: Guess Who? No. No. Bingo, Mary, you win the big prize, you get to spend eternity by my side, down a step, but still pretty close.

"Yes, she is," and Eleanor nodded over to the sheets of corrugated tin.

I got up, dusting sand from my bottom, and went over. There was a long wide deep crack in the hard desert ground that the tin covered. I found it impossible to see if anyone was down there in the dark. I couldn't imagine ever wanting to be down there.

We built a fire and drank tequila straight from the bottle. The whole mystical babble failed to die down. It became clear it was becoming the three of them there and the one of me here. I could handle that. I preferred to handle that. Maria lit a joint and said we were about to make the night magical. I've

used marijuana for most of my life and I'm a long way from finding it magical anymore. Now it's a 'glad I'm high' is about as good as it gets.

"It's electric," Eleanor said, handing me the joint. "Take another toke. Enjoy it. Take one more. Maria and I are so glad you're here."

It turned out Running Eagle had been in her hole the last three days. I asked how they knew she was still alive. Apparently she sang, not often, but sometimes, enough they knew she was still kicking. I wanted to knock on that tin sheet so badly. Hey there, you down there? The girls might have been playing with our heads. Let's tell them we got a running eagle in a hole in the ground.

They both knelt on Marcus' either side. They smelled him up and down.

"You smell that?"

"I smell it."

"You know what I smell?"

"I know what you smell."

They began to crawl over on their hands and knees. The fire had really built up and I watched their shadows cross the desert floor. I don't like being smelled, never have, some people get off on smelling and being smelled, I don't, unless it's a lover, and even then I try to pick my scents.

They were now on either side of me.

"You smell it?"

"Yes, I do."

"I smell sex."

“They’ve had sex.”

“Recently.”

“Yes, they have.”

As I attempted to push them away I saw my hand leave a blue and yellow trace in its wake and I understood what they really meant by magic and electric. Being dosed when you haven’t assented to being dosed is a crime against humanity. If they had asked me, I would have said absolutely not, the last place I’d want to trip would be out here with these people I didn’t know, and I hope Marcus would have said no too.

But I was fucked. I knew that. It wasn’t bad yet, but it would be. It had that feel to it. I went over to Marcus and got as close to him as I could.

I wasn’t feeling very good about the world and I was having a whole Tarantino thing going on.

They invited us and I knew what they were inviting us for, and I said no, no, thank you. I’ve tried my best with women, I really have, truly our species better half, and I think you owe it to yourself to see if you like it, which I don’t. I know half a dozen times hardly counts for much of an attempt, barely scratching the surface, but not once did I feel more than a puerile interest. After a while, I performed as best I could, waiting for it to be over, so I could put my clothes back on and do something a little bit more compelling. Sex, I think, should be at least engaging, and I didn’t feel anything like that sort of thing, with women.



. Their conversation got mixed up with the fire and Milky Way and it sounded like the chirp of cricket angels out on the far horizon.

“It’s okay,” he said, standing by the tent, looking at me, looking at me. “We’re just ghosts in the wind. Ghosts on the wind.” He laughed. I laughed too. I don’t know why I laughed. I guess he took my laughter as a token of assent. But I hope he wasn’t that stupid. I knew he knew I knew he knew what he was doing and what he was doing wasn’t any good at all.

He opened the tent flap and went inside.

Psychedelics, for me, bring on odd obsessions. I will fix on something and drill down to its core. One time, in college, when we were all tripping together, I spent the entire night cleaning our apartment while the others took great glee, watching me vacuum, mop, dust, polish and whatnot, seeing me as some sort of hilarious entertainment, whereas I only saw endless corruption invading my living space. Or, one fall, Marcus and I visiting Beth in New York and taking acid and going out for a walk in Central Park and I ended up on my hands and knees, spending hours trying to find two leaves that looked the same, mistaking dead foliage for the old snowflake saw. So it was there in the high desert, with the canopy of stars and galaxies in the black and dark blue firmament, with Marcus and the two women in the tent, that I began to—I don’t really remember what I began to—I just know in the morning, as the sun rose like a great yellow and red balloon, that my hands and face were so raw they were bleeding. In my reflection in the truck window I saw I’d done some real damage. Marcus stood

away from the tent. I heard the girls calling his name. He looked flabbergasted by the morning sunshine.

The keys were in the ignition. I found a pen and some paper in the glove compartment and I wrote a note and put it under a rock, telling them where they could find their truck. I drove to Fort Stockton. On the way I passed our broken down rental. I pulled over and got his bags from the back of the truck and locked them in the car's trunk. At the same old convenience store I washed up in the bathroom. In the mirror I looked like I'd been mangled and beaten. The clerk behind the counter gave me a look of shock, surprise and sorrow. I left the truck at the municipal airport, where I caught a commuter propeller to El Paso. From there it was another half day of waiting for a plane back home. I bought some makeup and did my best to repair the damage.